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MAXWELL ARMFIELD

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# A DRAMA BOOKSHOP

By Mrs. James Harvey Robinson

OME recent exploration of London book shops in search of contemporary drama produced such surprisingly meagre results as to make one wonder whether the British reading public could be even more oblivious than that of America to the charm and interest of the play as a literary form. Such a suspicion seems the more improbable in view of the fact that the dramatic authors most widely read in the United States are British. Possibly, also, the book shops alone do not furnish a fair criterion. For aught the writer knows, drama may be the most popular subject in English public and lending libraries; or the English reader may have some special technique not known to the outlander for getting hold of plays for reading. In any case if he has already acquired the taste and habit of reading plays, if he keeps track of publishers' announcements and reads the literary reviews and St. John Ervine's weekly letter in the *Sunday Observer*, he may know in advance just what play, or book of comment or criticism, he wants, and can then obtain it through any bookseller with at most a slight delay.

But where is he—the intelligent amateur—or where is the man or woman interested professionally in some phase of the drama or the theatre, to find a comprehensive, well-chosen stock of dramatic literature and a sales person in attendance with at least as intelligent an acquaintance with his stock as one would expect at the greengrocer's or the haberdasher's? And, what is perhaps still more important, how is the small nucleus of play readers composed of professionals and intelligent amateurs to be recruited from the general reading public to form the great body of discriminating readers and theatre-goers which it is the aim of the Drama League to create, if no inducement, or even opportunity is offered to them of examining and purchasing plays?

Alike for the sophisticated and the novice there are three requisites for a satisfactory selection of modern plays for reading; first, a varied and comprehensive collection; second, adequate display of the books; and third, intelligent attendance. If this combination is to be found in London it eluded me, though I "sought it with thimbles and

sought it with care," hopefully visiting all the book shops, large and small, general and special, that I knew or that were suggested by any of the literary friends whom I catechised on the subject.

The most varied and well chosen selection I found at a well-known bookseller's in the City, together with a real interest in and knowledge of the subject on the part of one of the members of the firm who regretted the obvious fact that their space was already too crowded to admit either of the enlarging or the proper display of their stock of drama.

At an equally well-known shop in the West End I had a spicy encounter with a young clerk whose patriotism was of the hundred per cent. variety, whatever might be thought of his tact or salesmanship. I had begun by asking for a copy of Maugham's *The Circle*, which had just closed a long run at the Haymarket, but he had not the book and did not recognize it as a play. (I asked for this play at a number of places in vain). Then, having asked to see what they had in the way of modern drama, I was shown three shelves, each about two feet long, containing a curiously haphazard collection. I could not believe that these few odd volumes constituted their entire stock, and intimated as much to the salesman:

"But, madam," said he, in a tone of bored superiority, "that is practically all there is to be had."

"Oh, surely not!" I returned mildly. "I happen to be rather familiar with this particular line of books as I am interested in a book shop in New York that deals exclusively in plays and books about the theatre."

"Ah, yes," his superiority now taking on an edge, "we are told there are a lot of plays published in America that are quite worthless and that we would not think of carrying."

"But our shelves are largely filled with English authors. And some of the recent American plays are quite interesting. Do you happen to know any of them?"

"No, of course we know *nothing* over here, and you Americans, who know it all, think you must come over and tell us."

At this point, fearing the conversation

was going to develop into an "international incident," I discreetly retired. Although this was the only occasion on which I encountered anything but courtesy, I was assured in several other shops that their small stock of modern plays contained "practically everything that is to be had."

If a somewhat more encouraging state of affairs obtains at present in New York, it is largely due to the initiative of the New York Drama League. It has always been an important aspect of the Drama League idea to encourage the reading of plays for pleasure as well as for study, for it was early realized that the League's task was not only to bring the discriminating audience that already existed to the support and enjoyment of the plays that were worth while, but to multiply that audience a thousand fold until a good play could be at least as sure of *paying* as a bad one. (And behold! in spite of all the taunts levelled at "Drama League high-brows" that day seems already to be dawning!) Much good work was done for the printed play through libraries, schools and clubs, the prejudice against printing a current play for fear of hurting its business in the theatre was being gradually undermined, and American publishers were becoming increasingly willing to take the risks of publishing plays. But the booksellers were slow to join the procession, and five years ago, in the fall of 1916, the New York Drama League determined to take the bull by the horns and start a Drama Book Shop, as the most concrete and direct method of stimulating not only the *reading*, but the *buying* of plays, and thereby encouraging the publication of new ones. There was no capital to invest, no funds to make possible a suitable shop room or adequate clerical assistance—only enthusiasm and the determination to work toward a practical solution of the problem. The chief publishers of dramatic literature in the United States were consulted and their cordial interest and co-operation made it possible to inaugurate the experiment at the offices of the Drama League in November, 1916.

A more unfortunate moment for launching such an undertaking could hardly have been chosen, for a few months later the United States entered the World War and the necessity of concentrating every ounce

of available energy and effort on achieving the apparently impossible in that national task produced an unheard-of mortality among infant enterprises of all sorts. However the New York Drama League not only clung obstinately to its little Book Shop, but made it serve the purposes of the war by constituting it an information bureau and headquarters for patriotic plays and entertainments for which there was an enormous demand.

Having thus not only survived the war but done its "bit," the Drama Book Shop has been developing during the past three years in its legitimate field, operating, however, under the serious handicap of extremely cramped quarters in an office building, where there was no possibility of appeal to the casual passer-by, and with no funds for neutralising this disadvantage by advertising outside the membership of the League. It was one of our pet jokes that our space was so limited that we had to make appointments with our customers! In spite of these limitations it has met such a real need that not only is it now well known in New York and vicinity, but every day brings orders and inquiries from the uttermost parts of the United States and beyond. Not the least part of its usefulness has consisted in catering to, and to some extent guiding and stimulating the extraordinary development of amateur production which has taken place in the United States during the past few years, and which has reached a point, both as to quantity and quality, which the writer believes to be unapproached in any other country at present. There is, indeed, a *furore* for it. Every sort of group is giving plays; schools, public and private, church societies, settlements, colleges, boys' clubs, girls' clubs, college clubs, women's clubs, propaganda societies, beside numerous groups all over the country formed and maintained for the sole purpose of dramatic production, many of which are doing interesting, original, serious work.

Naturally much of this play-giving is of no interest from the dramatic standpoint, however important it may be socially, but nevertheless the movement as a whole is of immense significance in its potential effect on the attitude of the present and coming generation toward the drama and the theatre. The Drama Book Shop is playing

an essential rôle in this movement, for outside New York and a few other great centres, the difficulty of obtaining any selection of plays suitable either for reading or production is extremely embarrassing, and the convenience of having one centre of distribution devoted exclusively to this literature is correspondingly great.

Last May the New York Drama League moved its quarters to an attractive side street just off Fifth Avenue where the Book Shop has achieved its fond dream of an enticing shop on the street, large enough to permit a convenient display and classification of its wares, and easily accessible from the shopping district on one side and the theatre on the other. It is becoming more and more a meeting place for those professionally interested in the theatre. The numerous other activities of the New York Drama League bring many customers to the Book Shop, and the Book Shop, on the other hand, attracts people who would otherwise know nothing of the Drama League and its work. The wide-ranging interest in amateur production already referred to, tends to make the human element in the Book Shop's clientèle rascally varied and entertaining. Piquant juxtapositions are frequent—a group of youngsters from an east side settlement inquiring, in rich Bowery accents "fer a play fer us fellers to give that's kind-a lively—none o' them fairy stories er love stuff"; a Little Theatre producer looking for a special type of comedy to fill out his next bill; an overworked school teacher who has to get up a Christmas play, pathetically grateful for a selected list of them that is given her to choose from; a young actress who has just discovered the shop and thinks it is "thrilling"; the president of a college who owns the most complete collection of American drama in the country browsing around to see if there is anything new; a young man with a foreign accent who asks for a copy of d'Annunzio's "Dead City"—you haven't a copy but will try to get one. Will he give you his name and address?

"The name is d'Annunzio." "Yes, but your name?"

"Ugo d'Annunzio." "Oh! are you perhaps . . . ?"

"I am the son of Gabriele d'Annunzio—my address is \_\_\_\_\_," and before you can think of a tactful opening for a con-

versation about his amazing poet-patriot-playwright of a father he is gone, and you turn to attend to a Japanese student who is one of your best customers, or perhaps the Russian director of one of the great co-operative associations in Russia, who tells you about some of the literary masterpieces which we should consider "high brow," but which are given in village community theatres in Russia by those "ignorant Russian peasants" whom we are allowing to starve by the million because we don't like their government, although they don't like it either! "A quare world—surely."

Of all our foreign customers we ask one question, "Is there any book shop like this in your country, where nothing but plays and books about the drama and the theatre are sold?" And so far always the answer has been the same—"No, there is none." So that now we are becoming very proud, and from proclaiming our shop as the only one of its kind in America, we are now tempted to call it—true to the American type of advertising—"the only Drama Book Shop in the world." But we shall gladly renounce that exclusive title when we hear that the British Drama League has opened one in London. Speed the day!

#### THE EVERYMAN THEATRE.

We have received from Mr. Macdermott an announcement of a new organization to be known as "The Friends of the Everyman Theatre," with the object of supporting the splendid effort which is being made at Hampstead to develop a permanent Repertory Theatre. We have pleasure in printing the following extract, and in cordially advising our readers to associate themselves with the scheme.

"In order to exclude no friend, the minimum subscription has been fixed at 5s. Members will be advised regularly of the productions and activities of the theatre. The board room will be opened for use of members during performances, and theatrical publications of all countries will be placed there for reference. The actual methods of assisting will be communicated from time to time as the needs arise and schemes are formulated. One scheme is already prepared and awaiting your co-operation, and particulars will be sent immediately on receipt of your reply."



THE JOURNAL OF  
THE BRITISH DRAMA LEAGUE

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Telephone: GERRARD, 3157.

*Neither the Editor nor the Drama League as a whole accepts any responsibility for the opinions expressed in signed articles printed in this journal*

THE year 1921 closed auspiciously with a remarkably successful session organised by the British Drama League at the Conference of Educational Associations at University College, Gower Street. The two meetings have been so fully chronicled in the London and Provincial papers that we are making no attempt to include a report of them in DRAMA. But we must record our special thanks to Mr. Athole Stewart for having at such short notice taken the place of Miss Sybil Thorndike as chairman of the morning meeting. To the other speakers—Dr. Aikin, Miss Elsie Fogerty, and Miss Richardson, we are also grateful for their stimulating addresses, and to Dr. Boas and several members of the audience who contributed to the discussion on the synthetic use of drama. Our President, Lord Howard de Walden, presided at the afternoon meeting which dealt with the teaching of History through Play and Pageant. The large Botanical Theatre could not contain the crowd which assembled for Mr. Hilaire Belloc's lecture on this subject, and the session concluded with a Pageant of Historical Episodes most kindly conducted by the girls of Clapton Secondary School, under the leadership of Miss Barclay.

Earlier in December a meeting was held at the office of the Drama League, attended by representatives of some dozen London Amateur Societies. A discussion was held on how best those societies could co-operate in making their work known to each other and thus increasing their audiences. A second meeting will shortly be held at which it is hoped a definite scheme may be formulated. Meanwhile it was decided that the secretary of each society should be provided with a list of all the others, and these should be mutually informed of every dramatic performance as it came along. We trust that in this way a step may be made towards a closer co-operation among the London amateur groups.

We wish to record a special word of welcome to "The Gong," the new magazine which is to be issued monthly by the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. Such a magazine, springing directly from a centre of creative activity, is bound to sound a distinctive note which could not emanate from a purely journalistic source, and we shall look forward to succeeding numbers which, if they are as good as the first, will maintain a high standard of literary and artistic interest. Mr. Alan Bland edits "The Gong," and its price is one shilling monthly, or twelve shillings yearly post free.

In accordance with the resolution passed at the Sheffield Conference, we are printing in this number of the magazine, a complete list of Societies affiliated to the League. We regret that it will be impossible for us to reprint this list continuously, as our space is too limited to allow us to allocate a couple of pages to such a purpose in every issue. We shall, however, in every number publish a list of those societies joining during the preceding month, and the complete register will be published twice yearly.

Forthcoming fixtures include a lecture to be given by Mr. John Drinkwater, at the Pangbourne Twenty Club on the 27th of January on "Poetry and the Drama," and a performance of the "Wandering Jew" by the North London Group on the evening of January 21st, at the North London Polytechnic.

# NEWS FROM NORTH & SOUTH

## THE LENA ASHWELL ONCE-A-WEEK PLAYERS

began their career in 1915 under the name of "Concerts at the Front." Their present aim is to keep alive interest in the Drama in the districts where the regular theatre has practically ceased to exist. With the co-operation of several London Municipalities—but with no assistance from public funds—they play "Once a week" in the following boroughs :

Every Monday, Hampstead Garden Suburb Club; every Tuesday, Town Hall, Battersea; every Wednesday, Public Hall, Canning Town; every Thursday, Borough Hall, Deptford; every Friday, Borough Hall, Greenwich; every Saturday, Old Kent Road Baths, Camberwell.

Their prices of admission are low, and range from 8d. to 2s. 4d., and a reduction or even these prices is obtainable by taking advantage of their system of season tickets.

Those who are interested in the work, and believe in the necessity for a clean, sound theatre, cheaply run, could show sympathy in practical fashion by applying for season tickets at the office of the "Once-a-week" Players, 44, South Molton Street, W.1.

"The Child in Flanders" was first produced at Abbeville in 1917, as a Christmas entertainment for the troops.

## THE LITTLE THEATRE IN PARIS.

The Little Theatre in Paris is a Society, which has been formed in order to give occasional performances, in a Paris theatre, of plays in English, interpreted by a company whose chief members are professional actors and actresses of experience.

The members, the actors, the management and the plays will be partly British and partly American, and it is hoped to obtain the combined and enthusiastic support of both the American and British colonies in Paris, without which the enterprise cannot live.

The British and American Ambassadors in Paris have consented to be the joint Honorary Presidents of the Society.

The Director of the Society is Mr. Philip Carr, the well-known stage producer and dramatic critic. Mr. Carr had already founded in Paris, just before the war, "Le Petit Théâtre Anglais."

The executive Committee consists, in addition to Mr. Carr, of Miss Alys Hallard, Mr. W. W. Irwin, Mr. W. Morgan Day, Mr. E. Leyba and Miss Ada Meakin (Secretary).

Members of the Little Theatre in Paris are entitled to the following privileges :—1, Receiving notices of all performances and meetings; 2, the option to choose their seats for three days before tickets are sold to non-members; 3, a reduction of 10 per cent. in the price of vouchers; 4, the right to vote at meetings for the election of officers and the framing of the policy of the Theatre; 5, the right to take part in the performances, if a part is available, which, in the opinion of the Director, is suitable.

The annual subscription is 25.00 francs, reduced to 12.50 francs for the last three months of the year. Office address: 64, Rue du Rocher (8e).

## EXETER DRAMA LEAGUE.

There was a crowded attendance at the Barnfield Hall, Exeter, recently, to witness "The Mollusc," very creditably presented by the Exeter Drama League, of which Principal Hetherington is president. "The Mollusc," a brilliant comedy, was first staged by Sir Charles Wyndham in 1911. It is built around the story of a lady who nearly brings disaster to her home by an incurable laziness until her spirited brother from the colonies saves the situation. Mrs. Pollard ably took the difficult part of the lazy wife, her elocution being worthy of a professional actress, while Miss Ursula Radford gave a sympathetic interpretation of the charming young governess, Miss Roberts. As the spirited brother, Mr. E. T. England, head master, Exeter Grammar School, played his part excellently, and Mr. J. R. Cumming put plenty of comic verve into the part of the heavy husband.

"The Mollusc" was preceded by a short play, entitled "Lady Maud," by Mr. E. Hamel-Cooke (the energetic secretary and treasurer of the Exeter League). The parts were well sustained by the Misses C. Ponting, E. Coles, C. Bradford, M. Endacott, and Messrs. W. R. Bell and A. F. Godslan. The artistic scenic effects were arranged by F. Ford and Co., Exeter, and incidental music was given by Miss Gidley's orchestra.

## LONGSIGHT DRAMATIC SOCIETY.

A greatly appreciated performance of "The Younger Generation" was given by the Longsight Dramatic Society, at the "Grangethorpe" Pensions Ministry Hospital in Manchester on December 1st.

Mr. Harold Grimshaw, as James Kenyon, gave a convincing interpretation of the old Nonconformist, whose children rebel against the taboos of their "Christian home," and either have clandestine love affairs, or dally wickedly with the demon alcohol. To listen as he "prays over" them, for so they irreverently describe his admonitions, transported at least one member of the audience back into the eighties of last century and to a home where the Sabbath day, a silk hat, and black kid gloves, were inextricably mixed up with an awed conviction that father was a kind of deputy overseer to Jehovah.

Miss Thomasson made the part of Mrs. Kenyon a study of the perfect chapel-goer of thirty years ago, a woman who would consider the National Gallery a very indelicate exhibition, and to whom respectability and godliness are almost synonymous terms. All the other parts were in capable hands, and the whole performance was a gratifying example of what can be achieved by careful rehearsing, and painstaking attention to detail.

FRED P. DAVIS.

*To the Editor of DRAMA.*

SIR,—By your courtesy I am allowed to make a few comments on Mr. Athole Stewart's reply to my letter in the last issue of "Drama."

Brevity, at your bidding, compels me to pass by without further comment the vituperative personal attack which forms the major portion of his letter, and which, whether there is any reason for it or not, is of no interest to the reader, and is irrelevant to the subject under discussion. I must likewise forbear comment on the large number of things which Mr. Stewart imputes to me which I did not say.

Let me bring to Mr. Stewart's notice, by reiteration, the points which I brought forward in the first place.

(1) The curriculum at the usual School of Dramatic Art is too narrow. Mr. Stewart

calls the work done there a "training." Well, then, what are we quarrelling about?

My whole point is that I do not consider a "training" sufficient on which to go through life without an education behind it. He remarks that a general education is "presumed to have been acquired before taking up a special vocational training." Our opinions simply differ as to whether a person, at the average age at which people usually begin a course at a Dramatic School, is old enough to have acquired an "education" previously. Evidently we differ about the connotation of the word "education."

(2) Since the Schools of Dramatic Art do not supply the needs of education before or together with the professional training let us find something that does.

(3) I offer a constructive suggestion for this—a department of Dramatic Art in our Universities. Whether the suggestion is good or bad, workable or otherwise, is open to discussion, and is a matter of opinion. I have no wish to force my opinions on to people who do not want them, nor to deliver a childish attack of invective upon people who do not see eye to eye with me. I would ask Mr. Stewart to give us just a little something constructive after his attempts at pure destruction.

Finally, let me add that the London actor is *not* the "average" actor. Generally speaking, he is above the average.

I am, Sir,

Yours faithfully,  
GILBERT HALL.

University College,  
26th November, 1921.

We hope that readers of the magazine will take up the very interesting subject dealt with in this correspondence and that the discussion can be removed from the rather personal atmosphere which was unfortunately introduced by Mr. Hall's first letter. While expressing this hope we desire to explain quite clearly the position of the League in relation to correspondence which appears in the magazine. The League, of course, takes no responsibility for any opinions which may be expressed in a letter, its sole function being to provide a platform for discussion. Indeed we regard the insurance of a complete freedom of expression as among the most important functions of DRAMA, and we would rather err on the side of laxity than on that of censorship, even when the opinions expressed are clearly those of one *in statu pueri*.—THE EDITOR.

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 Bath Citizen Players  
 Bath Playgoers' Society  
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 Ben Greet Players  
 Bourneville Dramatic Society  
 Brigg Dramatic Society  
 Bristol Group  
 Bristol Playgoers' Club  
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 Buxton Literary Society Dramatic Circle  
 Caldecott Community  
 Catholic Play Society  
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 Cley-next-the-Sea Women's Institute  
 Clayesmore School  
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 Cotherstone Group  
 Cotswold Players  
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 The Crays Amateur Dramatic Society  
 Dalcroze Society  
 Dormansland Women's Institute  
 Dover County School Old Boys' Association  
 Dumfries Guild of Players  
 Dunsfold Group  
 Dunchurch and Thurlaston Women's Institute  
 Elizabeth Blake's Company  
 English Folk Dance Society  
 Exeter Drama League  
 Felixstowe School  
 Folk House, College Green, Bristol  
 Glastonbury Festival Players  
 Godstone Dramatic Society  
 Grantham Amateur Dramatic Society  
 Great Waltham Women's Institute  
 Green Room Amateur Dramatic Society  
 Grey Coat Hospital Staff Dramatic Society  
 Hammersmith Playhouse Circle  
 Harpenden Group  
 Huddersfield Thespians  
 Hull Shakespeare and Playgoers' Society  
 Incorporated Stage Society  
 Kensington Avenue Old Girls Association Dramatic Circle  
 Lancashire Catholic Players  
 Lancaster Footlights Club  
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 Letchworth Dramatic Society  
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 Selwyn House School  
 Sesame Shop  
 Sheffield Playgoers' Society  
 Sheffield Repertory Company  
 Shirehampton and Avonmouth Dramatic Society  
 Shirley Society  
 Shirley Women's Institute  
 St. Mary's College Literary and Dramatic Society  
 Stockport Garrick Society  
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 Tunbridge Wells Dramatic Club  
 Tunbridge Wells Group  
 Twenty Club, Pangbourne  
 Unnamed Society  
 Uppingham Women's Institute  
 Venture Dramatic Club  
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